DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 240 176 UD 023 233

AUTHOR Dinh, Thinh Van
TITLE The Indochinese Refugees: An Introduction to Their Cultures.
INSTITUTION Utah State Dept. of Social Services, Salt Lake City.
PUB DATE Dec 79
NOTE 13p.
PUB TYPE Reports - Descriptive (141)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Asian Americans; Cambodians; Cultural Awareness; *Cultural Traits; *Indochinese; Laotians; *Refugees; Vietnamese People

ABSTRACT

After a brief description of the origins and languages of the three major groups of Indochinese refugees in the United States--Vietnamese, Cambodians, and Laotians--and short references to subgroups, 20 observations on the general cultural traits of the Indochinese are given. These observations touch on the following: the importance of harmonious relationships, proper form, and family life; the concept of 'face'; communication techniques; ideas about age and class; responsiveness to authority; lack of trust; the tendency to live on a day-to-day basis; dating patterns; hospitality and gifts; eating habits; names; and the importance of Buddhism and Confucianism. (CMG)

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THE INDOCHINESE REFUGEES

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An Introduction To Their Cultures

UD023233

Authored by

Thinh Van Dinh, State Coordinator
Indochinese Refugee Assimilation Program
Children, Youth & Families
Department of Social Services

150 West North Temple
Salt Lake City, Utah 84103
533-7140

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THE INDOCHINESE REFUGEES:
An Introduction To Their Cultures

I DEFFINITION

An Indochinese refugee is a Vietnamese, Cambodian, or Laotian national who voluntarily came to the United States prior to, during, or after the Communist take-over in Indochina and has been paroled into the United States by the Immigration and Naturalization Service. Each refugee must possess INS Form I-94 which contains the alien registration number and the date of arrival, or Form I-151 or Form I-551 (the permanent resident card) as a result of adjustment of status under Public Law 95-145.

Subsequent to Public Law 94-23, "the Indochina and Migration Refugee Assistance Act of 1975," and Amendments thereof, approximately 255,000 Indochina refugees have been resettled throughout the United States. Although quite a few refugees have been somewhat successful in the new land, many still have to keep their entry-level jobs. However, once they have been provided with adequate language and vocational training, many of them will likely become productive American citizens.

For fear of persecution and/or execution due to the difference in political, religious, or social ideas, most of the Indochinese refugees would not want to return to their native lands even if relations were normalized and arrangements could be made.

It is a real challenging commitment to say that there is a compelling need to assimilate these refugees from Indochina into the American society. The 40,000 refugees that came to the United States earlier from Hungary and over 600,000 from Cuba had less difficulty than those from Southeast Asia. This is because of both the language and cultural barriers which are sometimes critical.

In order to facilitate the acculturation of Indochinese refugees into the American society, the following three steps should be urgently carried out and the following 20 general observations should be examined:

1. Locate all refugees throughout the State to assess their needs;

2. Set up language and vocational classes to enhance employability. Expand all refugee support programs to isolated areas where refugees are located;

3. Assist refugees in finding jobs. This step, once carried out, will considerably decrease public welfare budgets.

II INTRODUCTION

A. REFUGEE SUBGROUPS: The term "Indochinese" refers to, and includes the following subgroups: Vietnamese (36%), Ethnic Chinese (20%), Laotians (15%), Hmongs (15%), Cambodians or Khmers (10%), Black Thais (3%), and Nungs (1%).

Utah has five of the above mentioned subgroups speaking five languages entirely different from one another, namely: Vietnamese; Lao (spoken by most Laotian lowlanders and Hmong males); Hmong, spoken by the Hmongs or Laotian highlanders, often called Meo or Miao, the majority of whom sacrificed heavily during the war in Indochina when they were fighting on the U.S. side against the Communist infiltrators in the northern parts of Vietnam and Laos; Khmer (spoken by the Cambodians), and Chinese, chiefly Cantonese and Mandarin (spoken by 60% of recent boat people). Most of the Black Thais, who speak Thai Dam, have been resettled in Iowa. They are called Black Thais simply because most women traditionally wear black. They either have Vietnamese or Laotian nationality. They are not from Thailand. The Nungs who reside in the northern parts of Vietnam and Laos have also escaped in smaller groups to Southeast Asian camps.

B. A BRIEF HISTORY INTRODUCTION:

The Cambodians (Khmers)

The Cambodians have their cultural traditions originated from North India long before the Christian era. Therefore, the national religion in Cambodia has always been Buddhism. Angkor Wat besides other Khmer temples in Cambodia is still one of the wonders of the world because of its unique artistic sophistication.

Khmer language was adopted from Sankrit. However, because of the strong effect of the French system of education in French Indochina, most Cambodians can read and write in Roman characters.

The Laotians

Laos as a nation has a vast ethnic diversity. The Laotians or Laotian lowlanders are the dominant group, having Thai cultural origin. They seemed to have existed in the second half of the 13th century. The Hmongs (Meo or Miao) came from Southern China during the 19th century. They used to occupy the highlands in Laos, especially Xieng Khouang and Sam Neua.

There are almost two million Laotian lowlanders and about half a million Hmongs. Lao is the national language spoken in Laos. Therefore, most Laotian lowlanders do not speak Hmong, whereas most Hmong males speak Lao, especially due to the inter-cultural contact period of the Civil War (1960-1975).

The Vietnamese

According to Vietnamese legends the Vietnamese have had 4,000 years of culture, heavily influenced by Confucianism due to 1,000 years of Chinese domination prior to the second part of the 10th century A.D.

In the 19th century the French set up colonial control over Vietnam as well as the rest of what was then called French Indochina until 1954 when the Vietnamese defeated the French at Dien Bien Phu.

The Vietnamese language was invented by Spanish and Portuguese Catholic priests when they came to preach the gospel in the 17th century. Therefore, the Vietnamese use the Roman alphabet instead of characters.

Vietnamese is a monosyllabic and tonal language. There are three main dialects, namely: Hanoi dialect or North Vietnamese, having six tones; Saigon dialect or South Vietnamese, having five tones; and Hue dialect or Central Vietnamese, having four tones.

Among the Vietnamese refugees more than 60 percent of the most recent "boat people" are ethnic Chinese. They speak Chinese (chiefly Cantonese and/or Mandarin) and Vietnamese. Most of them used to be engaged in businesses of all types and really played an important role in the economy of Vietnam prior to the withdrawal of the Americans.

III OBSERVATIONS – GENERAL CULTURAL TRAITS OF THE INDOCHINESE

1. The peoples from Indochina tend to be diligent, intellectually alert, and gregarious. They learn and adapt well. However, they are extremely sentimental as well as unimaginably sensitive. The concep: of "face" is very strong among them. To an Asian, especially an Indochinese or Southeast Asian, "losing face" is often something unbearable. You may easily hurt their feelings, therefore, be careful!

   Because of language and cultural barriers, they will learn faster if your teaching is detailed and if you are patient. Speak distinctly and a bit slowly, and ask occasional discreet questions to determine whether previous conversation has been understood. The latter is necessary because many Indochinese refugees are very reluctant to admit that they don't comprehend something. Consequently, they will nod their heads as if everything is crystal clear, when actually they may understand little or nothing of what has been said. Don't ask yes-or-no questions! They react better to specific guidance and direction than to generalities. Do not imply. State what is needed to be said but avoid being abrupt or too commanding.

2. Harmonious relationships are very important to the Indochinese. This trait shows up in various ways. For example, they find it difficult to say "No" directly. They usually take an indirect approach in their conversations to dealings, particularly when they involve unpleasant matters. Americans often regard this as unnecessary beating around the bush. In the same vein, the Indochinese will say "Yes" when they really mean "No." This is not deviousness, but a desire not to hurt feelings or cause unpleasantness to retain the above-mentioned harmony in social relations. To the Vietnamese, Laotians, and Cambodians, repeated excuses most likely is a good clue to polite refusal.

3. They also try very hard to appear knowledgeable or right. They

will often say, "Yes, I understand," when they do not really understand. They will answer what they think you want to hear in order not to cause disharmony. To them, "changing the story a little bit," is not lying but is necessary to maintain harmony or to enhance their position. They are unlikely to ask direct questions, even when questions need to be asked. To them, words are silver but silence is golden. And of course, fury may take place after a period of silence.

4. Proper form or appearance is very important to the Indochinese. The ritual of how something is done is often more important than the actual accomplishment. In the gospel framework, they may want to emphasize the letter of the law over the spirit of the law. They often want exact guidance and direction in the tasks that are given. Tea and/or coffee are traditionally a "must," especially when guests are present.

5. The Indochinese do not readily show their emotions. Traditionally, if they have experienced a hurt, real or imaginary, they may wait a long time but eventually they will retaliate. Be careful not to misinterpret laughing or giggling, since these may cover up emotions they do not wish to show. The Indochinese, especially the Vietnamese, always smile or laugh even in distress. A smile may mean tolerance of an error or misunderstanding, submission to an unjust situation, acceptance of guilt, or embarrassment. Indochinese women tend to be embarrassed more easily than men. Sometimes anger or disapproval is covered up by silence. It does not necessarily mean they think that someone or something is funny. Sensitivity is neccessary to avoid hurt feelings. Misinterpretation of even a jest may lead to an imagined insult. When you realize they are offended, approach them through one of their trusted family members.

6. The refugees' communication techniques often differ from those of the Americans. They seemingly resent physical contact of any kind during a conversation. Because the head is considered a sacred part of the body, it is offensive to the Indochinese to be touched on the head or shoulder unless both shoulders are touched. Especially to the Cambodians putting your arms around their shoulders can only be done by close friends or relatives. A negative response may be considered as your unwillingness to help them. An evasive answer, however, is very acceptable. Direct questions are considered impolite in their cultures. They find the directness and abruptness of the American people rather frustrating and very difficult. They will also become offended if you give more attention to one than another, since they expect to be treated the same as everyone else. They abhor all kinds of discrimination (racial, religious, or cultural). To them, the black, the white, the Indians, the Chinese, or the Indochinese are all equal as human beings, because "all men are created equal . . . bestowed with inalienable rights for the pursuit of happiness."

7. Due to cultural differences, gestures and attitudes often convey different meanings to the Indochinese. They consider it extremely

impolite to beckon or to wave at anyone with upturned fingers. To motion for someone to come to you, the hand is used with the palm turned down. Waving, beckoning, or snapping the fingers to get someone's attention is considered very impolite. They may not look into the eyes of someone (i.e., their boss or supervisor) whom they respect. Americans feel that looking straight into someone's eyes while we are talking to him is a sign of straightforwardness. Don't expect the Indochinese to do this and don't misunderstand when they don't. Traditionally, in conversation, they don't look into the eyes of those whom they respect or who are superior in rank to them. This is an indication of politeness, not deviousness. Because the feet are considered the lowliest part of the body, it is offensive to the Vietnamese if a person, while sitting, points his foot at another individual. A Vietnamese youngster of Buddhist or Confucian background usually refrains himself from crossing his legs while sitting in front of an adult. Sitting straight with both feet on the floor is a form of respect and being humble.

8. Handshaking has gained wide acceptance among men in Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam. It is probably best, though, not to shake hands with a woman unless she offers her hand first. Most Indochinese who have been to Europe or have had dealings with Westerners, especially with the French, will always expect to shake hands. When in a home where you are served a drink, no matter how thirsty you may be, the cup or glass should sit on the table until the host or hostess invites you to drink. Many Indochinese tend to nod their heads while shaking hands, or they may shake hands with both hands. This is because they want to show politeness and/or respect. A youth from Laos, Vietnam, or Cambodia will not touch anyone of the opposite sex. Laotians, Vietnamese, Hmongs do not embrace or hold hands with each other in such a manner as may be labeled as "queer" or "gay" in America. However, many Cambodian males still keep the tradition of holding hands and hugging each other as a form of warm greeting.

9. Their ideas about age and classes are different from the American point of view. To the Indochinese, sharing expenses is not the rule. The senior person generally pays all. In a restaurant situation, one member of the party pays for all, since Dutch Treat is not a custom. In any situation, when the refugee offers to pay, the American should let him do so, even if he is obviously less able to afford it than the American. For the American to pay, despite the refugee's offer, would be considered a rejection of the latter's hospitality and a reflection upon his ability to pay. Therefore, when a poor, wretched refugee says to you, "Come on, let's go eat!" he means that he will "cover" your bill. Vice versa when you tell an Indochinese to go eat with you, *you had better count your money first!*

10. The Indochinese are very responsive to authority. There is a tendency not to question an authority figure, since the people would rather be told what to do and how to do it. Authority figures, as well as elders, are expected always to be right and appropriate in their judgement and way of behaving.

11. Very early in their lives, many Indochinese have learned not to trust anybody. They need to learn that trust is a principle of human behavior leading to true spiritual happiness. Show your trust and respect by listening to their solutions to their problems. Where possible, give them praise for accomplishing what they do. Like most Americans, they love their countries and they like to hear about the good things and the outstanding characteristics of their native lands. Your showing respect for them and their native lands will help develop their trust in you.

12. Family life is important. The primary loyalty is to the family. In the Indochinese family, the wife and mother has a strong influence in family leadership. Young girls are taught to take over the financial affairs and to run the family from a very early age. The husband and father is never expected to do anything with family finances except earn the money. Sons are rarely expected to do anything around the home. Therefore, don't expect Indochinese young men to sweep the floor for you. The older a child becomes, especially when a new baby takes his place, the less responsibility the parents feel toward him. Small children sometimes run around the house without a shirt, pants or diapers.

13. The Indochinese tend to live on a day-to-day basis and often daydream about the past. The concept of planning for the future is foreign to many of them. It is difficult for most men to make a decision, especially one that is supposed to be long-lasting and irrevocable. The Indochineese are not slaves to time. Being late or very early at a social gathering does not concern them very much. However, it is amazing to note that those refugees at work always observe punctuality, and their work habits are generally excellent.

14. The dating patterns of Indochinese teenagers are much different from those in the United States. Good social standards and moral purity are strictly observed in their homes. Most Indochinese parents are reluctant to allow their teenage daughters to go out with boys. The fair sex never expects to share the bill when she is dating or "going steady" with a young man.

15. The practice of imposing on another's hospitality is common. They do not think of themselves as an imposition, however. To them, a friendship implies that either party may invoke certain reciprocal obligations without notice.

16. Gifts are often given to gain a favor or a gift in return. This should not be encouraged. When you present them with a gift, they are likely to feel an obligation to give a gift or favor in return. Reassure them that this is not necessary in the American culture. When you give a gift, they will express their gratitude at the time and probably never mention it again. The gratitude for your thoughtfulness is more meaningful to them than the actual gift. They feel that further mention of the gift would take something away from the close relationship they felt toward you for the gift received. Gifts are given in pairs. It is better to receive two less

expensive ones than one nicer one. This is especially true of wedding gifts. Many Indochinese refugees, even some highly educated ones, are still somewhat superstitious.

17. Their eating habits should also be respected. Their way of preparing food is very time-consuming and the smells can be pretty hard for Americans to take. An Indochinese family may leave you and the family member who invited you to their home to eat alone so that you may have special time together as friends. To indicate there was enough to eat and that you are satisfied, leave a little food on the serving platters or bowls. The older person is the first to begin eating.

18. Vietnamese names nearly always consist of a family name, middle name, and given name, in that order (this is the reverse of the American custom, where the given name comes first and the family name last). The terms Mr., Mrs., Miss are used with the given name rather than the family name. Again, this is the opposite of the American custom. Thus, Dinh Van Thinh is addressed as Mr. Thinh and Nguyen Thi Oi as Mrs. Oi. Most Vietnamese first and Middle names have flowery meanings, whereas family names are derived from the names of ancient kings.

    The Cambodians usually have the family name written first and the given name written last. Very rarely do Cambodians have a middle name. Therefore, if a Khmer says his full name is, for instance, Bun Kheng, we should know that his last name is Bun, and Kheng is his first or given name. The same order applies to names of Laotians, Hmongs, and Chinese, although Vietnamese names and Hmong names often have a middle name. Names of Laotian lowlanders are usually longer than names of other nationals. Most Indochinese or Southeast Asians, especially adults, are still used to writing their full names in their own order, i.e., the first name written last and the last name written first. Many still prefer being called by the first name instead of by the last name, for all occasions. Married women are to be called by either their maiden name or their husband's first name, preceded, of course, by the equivalent of "Mrs."

19. Most Indochinese think nothing of asking personal questions, such as your age, your salary, the amount something may have cost, and so forth. An evasive answer should satisfy them. You can show reciprocative interest in them by asking questions about their countries and cultures. Have an understanding heart, seeing eyes, and listening ears. Be sensitive to their needs and frustrations.

20. Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam have been referred to as three Buddhist countries. There is no doubt that Buddhist influence was widespread before the take-over of the Communists. In Vietnam alone, estimates of the number of fervent Buddhists and nominal followers, however, also vary widely. For comparison's sake, we can perhaps say that among the 52 million population in Vietnam, there may be between 10-12 million regular practicing Buddhists and as many nominal followers.

Another pervasive influence among the older generation is Confucianism, especially in Vietnam. It is more a way of life involving a code of ethics and morals than a religion. Confucianism was introduced into Vietnam by the Chinese during the first centuries of the Christian era. The Vietnamese belief in harmony in social relations is rooted in this Confucianism as is the practice of ancestor worship, Confucianism's most important ritual. To many Vietnamese, Laotian and Cambodian elders, leading a serene life of moral cleanliness is a "must." Many Vietnamese followers of other religions also practice Confucianism in some form or other. Many Indochinese honor and/or worship their ancestors. Therefore, please do not be surprised when upon entering a home, you see on the wall in the living room an altar bearing a photograph or portrait of a deceased parent or grandparent with a pot of incense sticks in front.

Because of heavy influence from Buddhism in their country, the Khmers often consider that happiness in life must be in consistence with harmonious family relationships, magnanimity towards one's neighbors.

State of Utah
Department of Social Services
December 1979